



# Alexandria Times

*Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria's first documented lynching

*Alexandria Times, April 23, 2020*

*Image: The Alexandria Police Station.*

On April 23, 1897, Joseph McCoy, an African American teenager, was forcibly taken from his jail cell by a white mob, shot, bludgeoned and hanged from the lamppost on the southeast corner of Cameron and Lee streets. Today marks 123 years since the lynching.

McCoy lived his entire life in Alexandria. He was born as Reconstruction ended and the era of Jim Crow began. He grew up in The Bottoms neighborhood on South Alfred Street among his extended family of parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles.

This incident occurred against a background of institutionalized racism in Virginia that had regained prominence after Reconstruction. With the backing of the Supreme Court, Jim Crow segregation laws impinged upon every aspect of African American life. Further, lynching, a form of extra-legal violence, was used to terrorize African American communities in the South.

The events began on April 22, when Richard Lacy accused McCoy, who had worked for Lacy for 16 years, of sexually assaulting three of Lacy's daughters. Lieutenant Smith of the Alexandria Police Department arrested McCoy without a warrant and without informing him that he was being arrested. McCoy denied the charge when informed of it.

McCoy was locked in a cell at the Alexandria Police Station House, the current location of Alexandria City Hall. With Washington Times reporter John H. Strider as a witness, Smith interrogated McCoy, and he reported that the prisoner confessed to the crime, despite his earlier denial.

On the evening of April 22, a mob attempted to break down the door of the Alexandria Police Station House, but they were repulsed by the officers on duty. Smith addressed the attackers and claimed he was able to persuade them all to go home and cause no further trouble. He also stated that he recognized no-one in this attack, or in the one that was to come later that night.

The mayor of Alexandria never took action after being informed of the first attack, and at 1 a.m., a second attack overwhelmed the officers at the station house. They received no reinforcements from the local Alexandria Light Infantry, and indeed, it appears that many of these men were in the mob.

McCoy was pulled from his cell and dragged to the corner of Cameron and Lee streets. The devastating effects of the assault upon his body were described in a Washington Post article:

"The body of McCoy was left hanging to the lamppost for 15 minutes before it was cut down. Three bullet holes were found, one in the left shoulder and two bullets in the left thigh. The left eye was much swollen. As he was strung to the lamppost he was struck on the head with a cobblestone... A pool of blood was at the base of the post."

McCoy's funeral took place on April 24, 1897. The service was conducted by the Rev. William Gaines, pastor of Robert's Chapel, now Robert's Memorial United Methodist Church. An aunt of McCoy's



Alexandria Police Station.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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visited Demaine and Son Funeral Home where his body was held and said, "As the people killed him, they will have to bury him."

Alexandria's failure to stop the lynching was condemned in a lengthy investigation by the governor of Virginia. It also provoked outrage in the African American press. The Richmond Planet said:

"This act was in violation of the laws of Virginia and the statutes of the United States. It was murder pure and simple and as it was premeditated, executed with precision, it was murder of the first degree."

To mark the first official acknowledgement of this tragic event of 123 years ago, the city had planned a large community gathering at the site on April 23. Due to recent CDC guidelines, alternative remembrances will be posted on [Alexandriava.gov/historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/historic).

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is inspired by the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial includes more than 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. Alexandria's pillar has two names on it. The first is Joseph McCoy; the second is Benjamin Thomas, lynched on Aug. 8, 1899.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is dedicated to telling the story of these two men. The many volunteers in this project are committed to community dialogue and education about race and equity. These discussions will not always be comfortable, but if honest, they will aid us in a journey to restorative justice.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria. This article is part of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, Equal Justice Initiative.*